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REVIEW ARTICLE

THE MOTIVATIONAL SPECTRUM: UNPACKING THE VALUES AND DRIVERS OF VOLUNTEERISM IN COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Muhammad Aqeel Ashraf^a, Ajai Pratap Singh^b, Shadika Haque Monia^c^a Faculty of Artificial Intelligence & Engineering, Multimedia University, Persiaran Multimedia 63100, Cyberjaya, Selangor.^b Department of Applied Psychology, VBS Purvanchal University, Jaunpur, India.^c School of Law, Britannia University, Comilla, Bangladesh.*Corresponding Author Email: rehanshahgilani87@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

Volunteerism is a critical pillar of civil society, often conceptualized as a pure expression of altruistic social values. However, the motivations that drive individuals to volunteer are complex and multifaceted. This study investigates the primary motivations for volunteerism among participants in community-based organizations (CBOs) and examines how these motivations correlate with volunteer retention and satisfaction. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, quantitative data was collected via an online survey (N=207) incorporating the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), and qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews (N=15). Quantitative results revealed that while values (altruism) was a significant motivator (M=4.21, SD=0.72), it was closely rivaled by the understanding motive (desire to learn new skills) (M=4.18, SD=0.68). Qualitative analysis uncovered a synergistic relationship between altruistic and instrumental motives, where personal growth often reinforced commitment to altruistic goals. A significant positive correlation was found between a diversity of motivating factors and long-term retention ($r(205) = .45, p < .001$). The findings challenge the simplistic altruism-instrumentalism dichotomy, suggesting that effective volunteer management requires recognizing and nurturing this broad motivational spectrum to foster sustainable engagement.

KEYWORDS

volunteerism, motivation, values, Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), retention, community-based organizations, mixed-methods

1. INTRODUCTION

Volunteerism represents a fundamental expression of social values, contributing significantly to social capital, community resilience, and public service delivery (Putnam, 2000; Wilson, 2012). It is widely perceived as a selfless act, a manifestation of prosocial behavior driven by altruism and a desire to contribute to the common good. This perspective aligns with value-based motivations, where actions are guided by deeply held beliefs about morality and social responsibility (Clary et al., 1998).

However, a substantial body of research complicates this purely altruistic narrative. Sociologists and psychologists argue that volunteer motivation is rarely unitary; instead, it is a complex amalgam of altruistic and egoistic, or instrumental, drivers (Yeung, 2004). Individuals may volunteer to express compassion (values), but also to learn new skills (understanding), to advance their careers (career), for social connection (social), to cope with personal loss (protective), or to enhance their self-esteem (enhancement) (Clary et al., 1998).

This study seeks to explore this complex motivational landscape within the context of community-based organizations (CBOs). These organizations rely heavily on volunteer efforts and represent a key site where abstract social values are translated into concrete action. The primary research questions are:

- What are the primary motivational factors, as measured by the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI), that drive individuals to volunteer in CBOs?

- How do these motivational factors relate to volunteer satisfaction and intentions for continued service?
- How do volunteers themselves narrate and reconcile the interplay between altruistic values and instrumental benefits?

By answering these questions, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of volunteer motivation that can inform more effective recruitment, placement, and retention strategies for non-profit organizations, ultimately strengthening the third sector.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The first, quantitative phase involved a cross-sectional survey to identify and measure motivational factors across a broad sample. The second, qualitative phase involved interviews with a subset of survey participants to provide depth and context to the quantitative findings.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

A convenience sample of volunteers was recruited through partnerships with five diverse CBOs in a major metropolitan area, focusing on sectors including food security, environmental conservation, and youth mentorship. Inclusion criteria required participants to be aged 18+ and to have volunteered for at least three months.

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- Quantitative Sample: 207 volunteers completed the survey (response rate: 68%). The sample was 68% female, with a mean age of 41.3 years (SD = 12.7).
- Qualitative Sub-sample: 15 participants from the survey sample were purposively selected to ensure diversity in age, gender, and primary motivational scores for in-depth interviews.

2.3 Data Collection

- Quantitative Instrument: An online survey collected demographic data and utilized the established 24-item Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) (Clary et al., 1998). Respondents rated items on a 5-point Likert scale (1=Not at all important/accurate, 5=Extremely important/accurate) for six motivational subscales: Values, Understanding, Social, Career, Protective, and Enhancement. The survey also included measures for satisfaction (5 items, $\alpha = .88$) and intention to continue volunteering (3 items, $\alpha = .91$).
- Qualitative Instrument: Semi-structured interviews, approximately 45-60 minutes long, were conducted and audio-recorded. The interview

guide explored participants’ initial reasons for volunteering, experiences, perceived benefits, and future intentions.

2.4 Data Analysis

- Quantitative Analysis: Data was analyzed using SPSS v.28. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were calculated for all VFI subscales. Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine relationships between motivations, satisfaction, and retention intentions.
- Qualitative Analysis: Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was used to identify themes related to motivation and the experience of volunteering.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Quantitative Findings

Descriptive statistics for the six VFI motivational subscales are presented in Table 1. The Values function (altruism) was the highest-rated motive, though the Understanding function was a very close second.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) Subscales (N=207)			
Motivational Function	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Description
Values	4.21	0.72	Expressing altruistic and humanitarian values
Understanding	4.18	0.68	Learning new skills and gaining knowledge
Enhancement	3.89	0.81	Promoting psychological growth and self-esteem
Social	3.75	0.85	Strengthening social relationships and connections
Career	3.02	1.02	Gaining career-related experience and benefits
Protective	2.45	0.93	Reducing negative feelings or addressing personal problems

Correlational analysis revealed several significant relationships. As shown in Table 2, a strong, positive correlation was found between the total

number of motivating factors rated above 3 (i.e., moderately important) and both satisfaction and intention to continue volunteering.

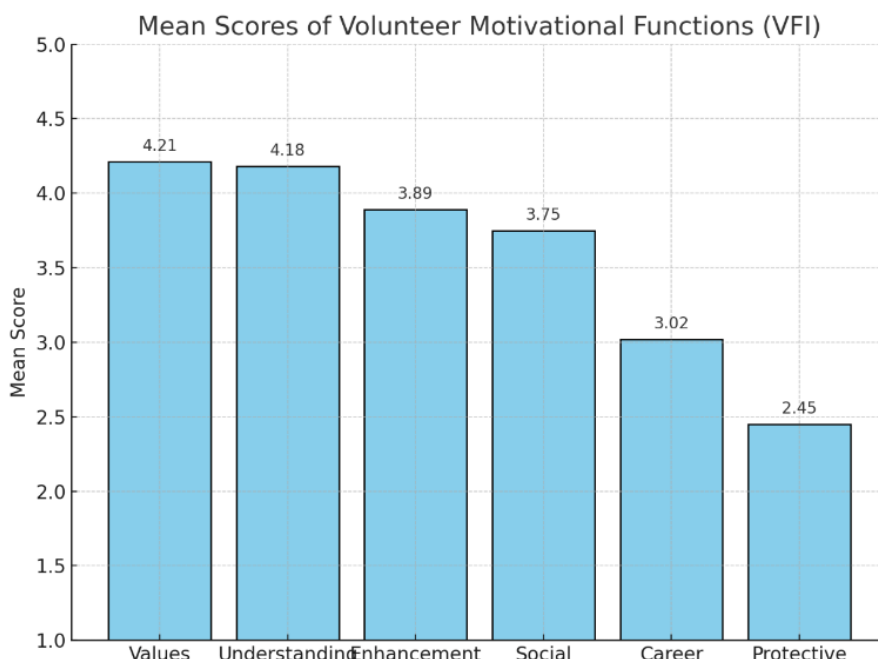


Figure 1: Visual comparison of the mean scores for each motivational function, illustrating the dominance of Values and Understanding

Table 2: Correlations Between Number of Motivations, Satisfaction, and Retention (N=207)

Variable	1	2	3
1. Number of Motivations (Score >3)	—		
2. Satisfaction	.41**	—	
3. Intention to Continue	.45**	.67**	—
*Note: ** p < .001*			

3.2 Qualitative Findings

Thematic analysis of interview data provided rich context for the quantitative results. Three key themes emerged:

- **The Synergy of Values and Understanding:** Participants frequently framed their motivation as a blend of "giving back" and "growing personally." For example, a youth mentor stated, "I wanted to be a positive role model [Values]... but I also knew I wanted to be a teacher, so this was a perfect way to see if I was any good at it [Understanding/Career]."
- **Motivation as a Dynamic Process:** Initial motivations often evolved. A food bank volunteer noted, "I started because my company encouraged it [Social]. But then you see the direct impact you have on a family, and it becomes something deeper [Values]. Now I come for me."
- **The Primacy of Recognition and Fit:** Satisfaction was highest when the volunteer role aligned with and fulfilled their specific mix of motivations. A volunteer whose primary motive was Understanding expressed frustration in a role that was purely manual labor, lacking learning opportunities.

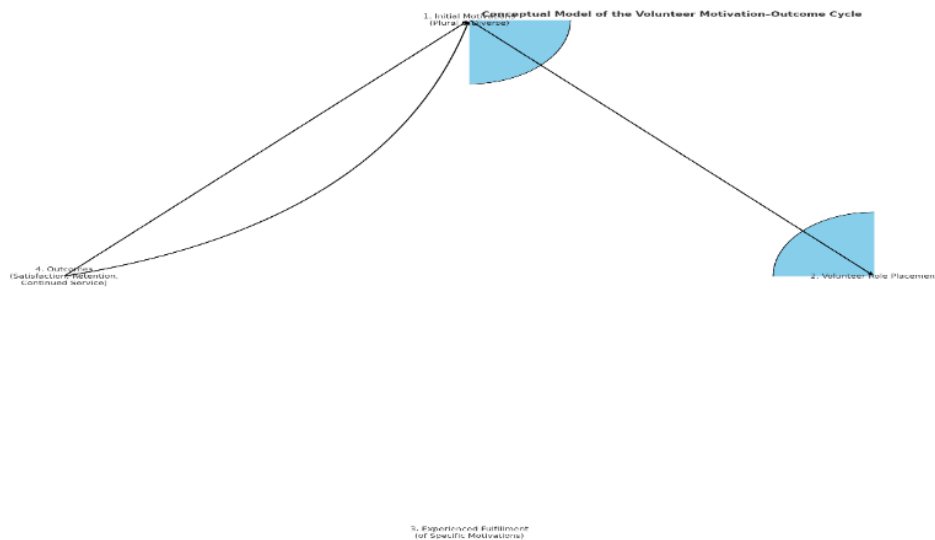


Figure 2: Conceptualizes this dynamic interplay between initial motivation, organizational fit, and outcomes, derived from the qualitative data.

4. DISCUSSION

This study confirms that volunteerism, while a profound expression of social values, is driven by a spectrum of motivations. The high mean scores for both Values (altruism) and Understanding (skill development) challenge the notion that these are opposing forces. Instead, they appear to be complementary and often synergistic drivers of volunteer engagement.

The strong positive correlation between the number of motivations and both satisfaction and retention intention is a critical finding. It supports the concept of "functional matching" proposed by Clary et al. (1998), whereby volunteer satisfaction is maximized when the volunteer experience fulfills the individual's specific motivational needs. An individual who volunteers for both values and understanding-related reasons will likely be more satisfied and stay longer than someone motivated by values alone if their role also provides learning opportunities.

The qualitative data richly illustrate this process, showing that motivations are not static traits but are dynamic and can evolve through the volunteer experience. The initial entry into service might be spurred

by an instrumental goal (e.g., building a resume), but the experience itself can cultivate and strengthen value-based commitments (Stukas et al., 2016). This evolution from instrumental to value-based motivation may be a key mechanism for long-term retention.

Implications for Practice: For managers of CBOs, these findings underscore the importance of:

- **Motivational Screening:** Using tools like the VFI during recruitment to identify a volunteer's primary motivators.
- **Role Crafting:** Designing and matching volunteers to roles that specifically cater to their motivational profile (e.g., offering data analysis tasks to a career-motivated volunteer).
- **Acknowledgment:** Recognizing and validating the diverse reasons people volunteer, rather than promoting a solely altruistic narrative, which may alienate those with more instrumental motives.
- **Limitations and Future Research:** The use of a convenience sample from one geographic region limits generalizability. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track how motivations change over time

and explore motivational differences across distinct cultural and organizational contexts.

5. CONCLUSION

Volunteerism remains a powerful expression of prosocial values and a cornerstone of a healthy society. However, to perceive it merely as self-sacrifice is to ignore the complex human psychology that sustains it. This study demonstrates that the engine of volunteerism is fueled by a blend of altruistic desire and instrumental benefit. The most engaged and retained volunteers are often those for whom volunteering is both a means to give back and a pathway to personal growth. By embracing, rather than dismissing, this motivational complexity, community organizations can more effectively harness the powerful human impulse to contribute, ensuring a more robust and sustainable volunteer workforce for the future.

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